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ABSTRACT

Current curricula in institutions of higher education are criticized in this speech for their lack of a common core of education. Several possibilities for developing such a common core include education centered around our common heritage and the challenges of the present. It is suggested that all students must be introduced to the events, individuals, the great ideas, and great literature that have contributed to human gains and losses. In the area of present challenges three proposals are made: (1) all students should be required to master the written and spoken word; (2) the functions of social institutions to which we are all tied should be clarified; and (3) the meaning of vocation should be explained. (SPG)

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# THE COMMON CORE

Remarks of

Ernest L. Boyer

United States Commissioner of Education

at the

285th Charter Day Convocation

College of William and Mary

Williamsburg, Virginia

Saturday, February 11, 1978

I don't need to remind this audience that in 1693 the King and Queen of England granted their first royal charter to a college in the New World.

The early colonists desperately needed this new, fledgling institution, for -- according to the first charter:

"There were no Schools to be found in those Days, nor any Opportunity for good Education.

"Some few, and very few indeed, of the richer Sort, sent their Children to England to be educated."

It was precisely in response to this clearly stated problem -- the need to provide an "Opportunity for good Education" -- that a "Free-School and College" was blessed by King William and Queen Mary.

And for the 285 years which have followed that first great initiative, the extending of educational opportunity has continued to be a central public policy of this Nation.

In America, we have continued to affirm that education and democracy are inextricably interlocked.

This goal--

This commitment to equal educational opportunity is still an unfinished agenda in this Nation, and it must be vigorously pursued.

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But this afternoon I should like to suggest that Jefferson's commitment to universal education

--was not just a commitment to access to our colleges and schools

--it was a commitment to excellence as well.

And while today we celebrate Jefferson's dream of expanding opportunity it is essential that we focus not only on the means of education but on the ends as well.

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Two hundred eighty-five years ago the College of William and Mary had a very clear notion of what it was supposed to do.

o The charter said this College was to train the ministry, provide pious education in "good Letters and Manners," and finally the college was to convert the Indians.

o To achieve those noble ends, a common curriculum was established--starting with Latin and Greek; moving on to "Rhetorick, Logick, Ethicks, Physicks, Metaphysicks, and Mathematicks;" and concluding with Scriptures and Hebrew.

The William and Mary curriculum was rigidly prescribed, and promotion from one tier of courses to the next was strictly monitored.

As the William and Mary statutes of 1727 put it, "Let no Blockhead or lazy Fellow in his Studies be elected."

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Today, of course, no one would recommend an absolutely rigid course of study for every student even though such a strategy may have made good sense 285 years ago.

o To claim that our Nation is not one culture, but many;

o to assert the rights of minorities;

o to protect individual liberties from mass tyrannies;

o to preserve the right to dissent, even to disobey--these are all keys to liberty. And to the extent that they have flowered in our midst, and have been affirmed by diversity on campus - to that extent we may be justly proud.

But this story of diversity, with all of its validity and vision, has because of excess an unhappy sequel.

I believe that - academically at least - the undertow of diversity has pulled us far from shore.

Today the safest thing one can say about a college diploma is that the student probably has been around the campus for about four years.

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Today we seem more confident of the length of a college education than we do about its substance.

On many campuses, required courses have been dropped, and the ones which remain reveal a staggering incoherence of purpose, often expressed as "distribution requirements."

Every core curriculum of the past was guided by a vision of coherence.

The classical curriculum that prevailed from the founding of William and Mary to the Revolution was based on the notion of

o a shared social structure,

o a communal view as to how all young minds should be trained,

o and a common belief in God, an afterlife, the church, and the "rights" and "wrongs" that should govern life.

The modest, general education reforms from the Revolution to the Civil War did not challenge coherence. They reinforced it. Science and technology and modern history were added to the rigid and required curriculum because the society's self-image had expanded, not fragmented.

And paradoxically the race toward "free electives" which followed was in its own way rooted in "commonality." But what was "common" was the freedom of self-determination; what was "shared" was the right to be autonomous and unique.

When general education languished and died, it was largely because the commonality of self triumphed over the commonality of substance.

Radical individualism offered a more powerful and accurate image of the times than the earlier alternatives.

I happen to believe that students must be free to follow their own interests, to develop their own aptitudes, and to pursue their own goals.

But truly educated persons also

o must move beyond themselves,

o must gain social perspectives,

o must see themselves in relation to other people and times,

o must understand how their origins and wants and needs are tied to the origins and wants and needs of others. Such perspectives are also central to the academic quest.

My point is this:

A college curriculum that suggests that students have nothing in common is just as flawed as one that suggests that all students are alike. And I believe that Jefferson's dream of the general diffusion of knowledge should be built on the central proposition that we do have common experiences which can and must be shared.

There is of course no single combination of courses to capture the essence of our oneness. But I'd like to suggest several possibilities to illustrate the point.

First, we share a common heritage, and we have an obligation to help the human race remember where it has been and how, for better or worse, it got to where it is.

o All students must be introduced to the events, individuals, the great ideas and great literature that have contributed consequentially to human gains and losses.

o An understanding of this past from which all of us have come should be required of all students.

Obviously, to talk about our heritage has a familiar ring. But a notion need not be rejected just because it is familiar, and if our schools and colleges do not help keep the past alive, we will not only have lost our past, we will have lost our future, too.

Here I should insert a word of caution.

It is not enough to be told that events have occurred, ideas have been thought, and people have been born and have died. Or that great literature has been written -- as important as this heritage may be.

o The successful approach will always ask of the events of the past that have to do with us;

Perhaps we need to pick the dozen or so moments which are the most crucial to inherit. To make that selection, our criteria would surely include

o the density of the moment (that is, the way it serves as a magnet for social, economic, political, and intellectual forces);

o the degree to which it is the crystallization of a historic characteristic (for example, the neoclassic)

o or a historic transition (for example, Newton);

o and the way in which that moment radiates out to include ourselves.

o To choose a few things carefully; to study them intensively and across disciplinary lines; and through them to see our own times -- these goals may be adequate for the new core.

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Second, we all confront the challenges of the present -- and our quality education should reflect this fact.

It has always seemed curious that most past experiments in general education have focused exclusively--almost compulsively--on the past.

o They have been remarkably inattentive to the crucial common experiences in the contemporary world.

o I believe a quality curriculum should also examine our existence here and now and focus on those contemporary circumstances that also shape our lives.

Here I have three examples to illustrate the point:

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First, we are all engaged in the sending and receiving of messages.

o Language is what makes us a unique species, and all students should be required to master the written and spoken word.

o They should understand how we use and misuse symbols, how we communicate not just with words, but also with mathematics and music and computers and dance.

Courses in communication should strive for "comprehensive literacy"--the ability to spot the hidden suppositions behind a message.

o Students should, for example, learn how to deal critically with advertising and propaganda.

o By looking at television news, they might elaborate a notion of "tube literacy."

o This emphasis on language is essential not only because it is the connecting tissue of our culture, but also because it becomes the tool for other learning.

Second, all of us are caught up in a world of social institutions. We are tied into schools and banks and towns and health plans and clubs, into the entire structure of contemporary life. No education has done its job if it does not clarify for students how these structures came to be and where they fit into the broader social context.

The guiding logic here is to recognize our common membership in our social structures,

o to clarify their functions,

o and to understand how organizations can and should be changed in light of changing social needs.

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Third, in order to understand ourselves and our contemporary world, we need a course on the meaning of vocation.

We hear a lot of talk these days about "liberal versus vocational" education, and it is suggested that our collegiate traditions are demeaned if they lead directly to a job. Such a view not only distorts the present; it also denies the past. Education has always been a blend of inspiration and utility.

It is true that some work is not vocation and that some jobs are not uplifting, but degrading.

o But the problem of relating work to education cannot be so easily dismissed.

o Many useful, challenging, and crucial jobs have emerged in recent years yet schools and colleges still confer prime legitimacy on those jobs that have been around the longest and to those we like the best.

Because of tradition, lethargy, ignorance, and snobbery, mindless distinctions are made between what is vocationally legitimate and illegitimate. Such distinctions have led to equally mindless choices about what can and cannot be offered at the arts and science colleges.

o It is all right, some say, to prepare to be a doctor, but it is less all right to be a nurse.

o It is all right to be an engineer, but to be a computer programmer is off limits.

o Teaching college is just great, but teaching elementary school is something else again.

o To dig the ruins of the past is a respectable objective, but to work with ruined lives in an urban jungle -- a much more demanding task -- is not so worthy.

o To read what has been written in the past is fine, but to aspire to write about the present -- as a journalist perhaps -- is not quite legitimate at many arts and science colleges.

What logic is used by those who make distinctions such as these, by those who -- through the curriculum they offer -- determine for their students which work is honorable and which is not?

I believe schools and colleges should be places where students come to understand that, for most of us, work is an expression of who we are and where we fit. "I work, therefore I am" may overstate the case, but it speaks to our current condition.

This is not to urge that colleges become vocational. Rather, it is to suggest that we simply begin to rediscover the true meaning of liberal education.

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I am, in short, proposing universal learning that

o not only looks at the heritage we share,

o and not only reflects on fundamental common experiences of the present,

o but also focuses on those alternatives for the future that in a thousand separate and unsuspected ways are being shaped today.

Such a core course would spend some time looking at the "history of the future."

In many ways societies are held together by their images of the future. It is important to consider the images that earlier cultures have possessed, as well as to look more closely at utopian literature, science fiction, scripture, millenarian tracts, and other sources of such images.

o Who are the social prophets of our time?

o What images of the future does our society possess?

o What are its central dogmas,

o and how do these compare with the forecasts offered by the emerging profession of futurology?

o How does the process of policy planning translate future alternatives into current choices?

These questions, too, deserve a place in the experience of every undergraduate.

We are at a pivotal time in human history, and educators must approach their responsibilities with a sense of confidence and of urgency.

o The human race continues to expand at a rate of 200,000 people a day, or 73 million more people every year.

o And every day more than 800 million people face gnawing hunger, living literally from hand to mouth.

o Tensions over resources grow more acute, and the quality of our environment is threatened.

And here are the questions we confront:

o Where will we get our food, and how can it be appropriately distributed?

o What about our energy supply, and how can it be equitably shared?

o How can we reduce the poisons in the atmosphere?

o Can we have a proper balance between population and the life-support system of this planet?

o How can we live together, with civility, in a climate of constraint? These are a few of the transcendent issues that today's young people must begin to think about with great care.

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One final word.

Dr. Lewis Thomas--author of Lives of a Cell, and a trustee of the Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center -- said recently at a meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science that these are not the best of times for the human mind.

> All sorts of things seem to be turning out wrong, and the century seems to be slipping through our fingers here at the end, with almost all promises unfilled. I cannot begin to guess at all the causes of our cultural sadness, not even the most important ones, but I can think of one thing that is wrong with us and eats away at us: we do not know enough about ourselves.
>
> We are ignorant about how we work, about where we fit in, and most of all about the enormous, imponderable system of life in which we are embedded as working parts.... It is a new experience for all of us. It's unfamiliar ground.
>
> Just think, two centuries ago we could explain everything about everything, out of pure reason, and now most of that elaborate and harmonious structure has come apart before our eyes.
>
> We are dumb.

Dr. Thomas's appeal is an eloquent one:

o it is a plea for more perspective,

o and it begins by searching for more knowledge about ourselves--where we come from, how we work, where we fit in, and where we want to go.

If this century does not slip forever through our fingers, it will be because learning--and especially our schools and colleges--will have directed us away from our splintered dumbness, and will have helped us focus together on our common goals.

This -- it seems to me -- is both the rationale and the urgency of the common core.

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